

“THIS RHYTHM DOES NOT PLEASE ME”: WOMEN PROTEST WAR  
IN DUNYA MIKHAIL’S POETRY

by

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## **Abstract**

In her collection of poems *The War Works Hard* (2005), Iraqi-American poet Dunya Mikhail presents her readers with unembellished insight into the Iraqi war from a woman's perspective. This perspective is rarely voiced in Iraqi war literature which is dominated by male writers concerned with men's heroism at the battle front and boundless patriotism. At the same time, these male authors rarely depict Iraqi women's experiences of war beyond the battle grounds. Even when women are present in such literature, they often share their men's point of view on war and voice only their acceptance of it. Mikhail, however, contemplates a counter narrative to this stereotypical female role by presenting women who protest war and the destruction it causes. Her poems portray mothers, lovers, sisters and daughters who protest war's brutality and injustice. Some of the women in Mikhail's poems protest war by directly or indirectly criticizing its institutions and condemning the leaders who promote it. While other women in her work find that their protest lies in their de-fragmentation of the destruction and loss caused by war, thus refusing its power over them and their loved ones. Yet, the most important form of women's protest of war in Mikhail's work is recollection. Through the recollection of their fragmented memories and lives, Mikhail's women manage to survive and find a spark of optimism in the darkness that war has unleashed. Their survival and their ability to re-establish their lives apart from war and the presence of men constitutes a powerful and dramatic protest of war's control over their lives.

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## **Dedication**

*For Esam  
my dream-maker*

## Introduction

when i was torn by war  
i took a brush  
immersed in death  
and drew a window  
on wars wall  
i opened it  
searching for  
something  
But  
i saw another war  
and a mother  
weaving a shroud  
for the dead man  
still in her womb

-Sinan Anton

War is not a new phenomenon in the lives of the Iraqi people. Over the stretch of about thirty years, the Iraqi people lived under a ruthless dictatorship that drove them into three destructive wars and sanctions that distressed their lives in every possible way. The Iraqis lost their homes and loved ones. They could only watch as their country was, and still is, being torn apart by the havoc of war, insurgency, and sectarian violence which instigated during the second Gulf war. Through these thirty years of affliction, Iraqi writers tried to convey the Iraqi experience through their writing. The majority of Iraqi writers could not even relate the actual suffering of their people, however, as strict censorship dictated the outcome of their writings. Therefore, the literature produced under the Ba'ath regime was filled with pro-war slogans and celebrations of the dictator leader and his battles.

In *Women and the War Story* (1996), Miriam Cooke discusses Iraqi war literature and the main themes in this genre. Cooke points to two major features of Iraqi war literature. The first is the dominant voice of the male writer that portrays the masculine perception of war as it

“glorifie[s] men’s heroism, humanitarianism, and patriotism and women’s jingoism” (Cooke 233). The second feature is the limited role of female characters in the literature of Iraqi men, as women “are reduced to patriotic symbols” (Cooke 234). Women protagonists in such literature motivate their husbands, lovers and sons to participate in war and welcome the idea of martyrdom. Like most world literature concerned with war, the perception of war is mainly masculine as “men were [viewed as] warriors, [while] women were watchers. Warriors talked about other warriors, women waited and listened” (Cooke, “Arab Women” 14). Moreover, even the occasional portrayal of women as soldiers in the works of Iraqi male writers is a masculine representation of women that hardly mirrors Iraqi women’s experience of warfare (24).

Nevertheless, Cooke points to an interesting aspect in Iraqi war literature that seems to distinguish it from other Arab war literature. “[I]n Iraq” Cooke argues, “it is primarily the women who have found ways to write against the war” (24). Iraqi women writers, she says, showed that their society’s male-dominated values and the war they created were self-destructive. Since they could not with impunity criticize their leader, they directed themselves to their readers. Their writing creates citizens with a conscience who can see through the manipulation that mobilizes a whole nation to fight a foolish war. (24-5)

In addition, Iraqi women’s protest of war is also hindered by the fact that women’s writings were not read as frequently as men’s work, nor were they as scrutinized by official censorship (24). So a few Iraqi women writers did find indirect ways to protest against the war, but they were overshadowed by mainstream Iraqi war literature written by men, which portrayed patriotic men and their willingness to sacrifice themselves for the presiding regime and country.

Dunya Mikhail, on the other hand, is a woman writer who challenges mainstream Iraqi war literature by presenting the Iraqi women’s experience of war. She steers away from



depicting the stereotypical Iraqi, whose superhuman patriotism is the only way to be faithful to the country. Mikhail discusses Iraqi war literature saying:

A huge amount of Iraqi war literature that was published inside Iraq, especially during the Iraq-Iran war, depicts the Iraqi soldier as a “superman.” That doesn’t mean all of that literature was trash, but only few Iraqi writers presented the Iraqi soldier merely as a “human being.” (Mikhail, Personal interview)

She also believes that women and men perceive war differently:

Most of Iraqi writers are males, many of whom had been in the battlefield. For them, it was a war with other men who they had to kill or be killed by. As a woman, I could see the war in the streets, in the tears of mothers, in the eyes of birds frightened by bullets, in the holes of the walls and of the helmets of those men returning from the battlefield.

(Mikhail, Personal interview)

Most women experience war differently than men do; far from the battlefield, they “experience war as civilians” (Sjoberg 87). Accordingly, Mikhail abandons the genre of war poetry that concentrates on the masculinity of war, in which men are the soldiers, the protectors, and finally the martyrs. She illustrates that women are also engaged in a battle of survival on the home front as they try to recover normalcy in spite of the fragmentations of war and loss. Mikhail’s women collect the bones of the martyred, deal with separation, and find a means for their families to survive the struggles of war. In addition, Mikhail rejects the role of the Iraqi women as a bystander, thus allowing them to function as equals to the men and not merely as passive beings awaiting rescue. Furthermore, Mikhail gives voice to Iraqi women through her poetry and protests their limited role in Iraqi war literature, as she depicts women who criticize war, who de-fragment its destruction, and who, finally, recollect the fragmentation it produces. She is set

apart from other Iraqi women writers by the fact that she not only protests war, but also allows the women in her poetry to recollect the pieces of life fragmented by men and their wars.

This work will discuss selected poems from Mikhail's *The War Works Hard* (2005), which portray women's protest of war. Before the actual discussion of Mikhail's poems, however, a brief overview of Iraqi history and the three most recent wars will assist in further understanding Mikhail's poetry that focus on these wars. In Chapter One, I talk briefly about the history of Iraq and about the Iran-Iraq war and both Gulf wars. In Chapter Two, I consider Arab-American literature, which has begun to emerge recently on the American literary scene. In the same chapter, I also reflect on the poet herself, as an Arab-American writer and on her own experience living under the former Iraqi regime.

According to my analyses of Mikhail's poetry, I find that women in her poems protest war in three ways. The first form of protest is women's criticism of war, which I discuss in Chapter Three. The poems included in this chapter are: "Bag of Bones," "The War Works Hard," "Inanna," "An Urgent Call," and "To Any Other Place." In each of these poems the writer criticizes war from different perspectives. For instance, the reader witnesses a mother's experience with war, while in another poem it is viewed from the eyes of a Sumerian goddess. Women in these poems also criticize war directly or by criticizing one of its accomplices, thus uncovering its diverse forms of malice.

In Chapter Four, I find that Mikhail's women protest war through their refusal to accept the fragmentation that war causes. The poems that reflect this are "The Prisoner" and "The Cup." While they are physically unable to protest war, the women in Mikhail's poems mentally de-fragment the change that war forced upon them. Thus, the women refuse the mere comprehension of war and the loss it has inflicted.

In the final chapter, I discuss the final form of protest in which Mikhail's women recollect the fragmentation that war has caused. This form of protest is found in the poems: "Bag of Bones," "The Prisoner," "Innana," and "To Any Other Place." Through mental and physical recollection the women in these poems are able to protest war's destruction. Recollection, which is the final form of protest, also plays as the final stage in a larger process of protest of war.

In the conclusion of this thesis, I discuss how the three forms of protest work together in three stages that begin with criticism, then de-fragmentation, and finally recollection leading to Mikhail's illustration of women who have the ability to break the traditional, stereotypical image of the Iraqi woman who is only capable of following in the path of her passive predecessors.

# **CHAPTER 1 - Iraq: History and Wars**

## **Brief Overview of Iraqi History**

Our country sleeps standing still  
its time passes standing still  
its heart beats standing still  
so let us stand still a minute in mourning..

-Dunya Mikhail

Iraq or Mesopotamia, the “land between the rivers,” as it was named by the Greeks (Worsnip 44), is famous for being home to the first civilizations known in history. Some of the greatest civilizations, dating back to 3000 B.C., thrived along the Tigris and Euphrates. Such as the Sumerian civilization which was located in the southern part of Iraq. Sumer was home to the first urban centers in the world and witnessed “achievements in the areas of religion, education, literature, and law” (Kramer 115). The Sumerian civilization has even left its impressions on the modern Western cultures (115).

While Sumer may have been the first civilization in ancient Iraq, it was not the last. Iraqi soil witnessed the rise and fall of many different groups of people who fought over the dominance of the land. After centuries of battles over the land between different civilizations, the Arabs entered Iraq during the 7<sup>th</sup> century, and Baghdad became the capital of the Arab Islamic empire during the reign of the Abbasid caliphs. Baghdad reached “the zenith of its prosperity under [caliph] Haroun al Rashid in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century, when it was considered the richest country in the world” (Worsnip 45, 47). However, Baghdad’s prominence did not last as it was destroyed in 1258 A.D. by the Mongols, whose attack ruined the city to the point that it

never rose to fame again. Later in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Iraq fell under the control of the Ottoman Turks until World War I, when it was occupied by the British Empire.

From Turkish rule to British occupancy, the Iraqi people entered the 20<sup>th</sup> century struggling for their independence. Although the 1920 revolution led to some form of release from direct British rule, Britain turned the country into a monarchy in 1921 by placing King Faisal I on the throne. Iraq finally liberated itself from Britain in 1932. Unfortunately, its people did not know peace as the country raged between revolutions, which finally led the end of the British imposed monarchy in the late 1950s (Worsnip 47, 49). After its already, “long history of political instability and repression” (Lewis 15), Iraq was plunged once again into turmoil with the emergence of different political powers that tried to control the country. Some of these conflicting political powers were represented by groups like: pro-British politicians, the Iraqi Communist Party, and the Arab Ba’ath Socialist Party. Iraqi history to this point was fairly grim, but in July 17, 1968, the Arab Ba’ath Socialist Party took over the country, and with it, came the notorious Saddam Hussein. Hussein’s power was almost instant following the 1968 revolution. After holding the title of assistant secretary-general of the Ba’ath Party, he became the deputy chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council in Iraq and was in charge of international security (al-Khalil xv). This position may have given Hussein power over the population, but more important it brought him a step closer to the highest position in Iraq.

### **The Three Iraqi Wars**

Every morning the war gets up from sleep,  
Afflicted with purifying fear,  
Leaving its memory in the mud of history.

-Fadhil al-Azzawi

### ***Iraq vs. Iran (1980-1988)***

The problems between Iran and Iraq began long before the full blown war between these two countries in 1980. The conflicts between the two nations were over issues like Shatt-Al-arab, the river in which the Tigris and Euphrates meet in the south of Iraq, the waterway which is Iraq's only access to the Arab Gulf, is also known as the Persian Gulf in the West. Other problems between the two countries concerned land, political power, and the Iranian support of Kurdish uprisings in northern Iraq. In 1979, both countries witnessed changes in political power: in Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini became leader of the revolutionary Islamic movement and forced the Iranian Shah and his family into exile. At about the same time in Iraq, vice president Saddam Hussein declared himself president of the republic by stripping Ahmed Hasan Al-Bakir, the president at the time, of all positions and placing him under house arrest (al-Khalil xvi). Then, in 1980, after the infringement of several agreements of peace between the neighboring countries, Iraq claimed that Iran "abrogated the Algiers Agreement [of March 1975] through 187 border violations" (al-Khalil 268). The actual war began after "Iranian forces shelled the [bordering] Iraqi towns of Khanaqin and Mandali" with Iraq responding by "occupying the district in which the Iranian artillery had been based" (Stansfield 109). The war "was long, immensely bloody and extremely expensive" (Bickerton 25) for Iraq, which had just started to witness development and the building of a modern infrastructure (Worsnip 57). Finally, both "sides suffered enormous losses while fighting each other to a standstill in a conflict that failed to resolve the original issues" (Lyon 134). For eight years, not a single Iraqi family was left untouched by the wretched war.

### ***Iraq vs. The United States of America and the Allied Forces (1991)***

Two years after the cease fire with Iran on August 8, 1988, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990. The issue of Kuwait goes back to the British and French partitioning of the Middle-East during World War I, as Kuwait was separated from the province of Basrah in southern Iraq (Bickerton 21). The desire to return Kuwait as a part of Iraq was an issue raised by at least a couple of Iraq's leaders during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, like King Ghazi in the late 1930s (21). However, Saddam Hussein was the only Iraqi leader to take military action to return Kuwait to Iraq, an operation that required less than a day (Stansfield 126). Not long after, on August 6, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution which authorized world-wide sanctions against Iraq, and on August 23 the UN agreed to station forces in the Gulf (Bickerton 57). After many negotiations, the Allied forces launched their attack on Iraq and its army in Kuwait on January 17, 1991 (59). The first Gulf War lasted only 43 days, however the Iraqi infrastructure was destroyed. Official buildings and communications were not the only target, as bridges and homes were also bombarded. Unfortunately, even bomb shelters were not safe from the air raids. An unforgettable example for the Iraqis is the bombardment the Ameria shelter by American air raids, in which around 500 people, mostly women and children were taking cover. There were very few survivors and the bodies that rescuers were able to pull out were "in a terrible state, charred, mangled and twisted, some of them almost beyond recognition" (123).

On Thursday, February 28 1991 President Bush Senior announced, "Kuwait is liberated. Iraq's army is defeated" (168). While the war with the allied forces ended, Iraq, especially the capital city of Baghdad, was left in a desolate situation as were its people. With no electricity, communications or main bridges the Iraqi people had to struggle to sustain the simplest means of

living. The destruction of the infrastructure was the least of Iraq's problems, however, as rebellions began in northern Iraq by the Kurds and in the south by the Shi'as. The first signs of uprising began in the south with the breakout of anti Ba'ath demonstrations around Basrah "resulting in the killing of a number of [Ba'ath] Party officials" (Stansfield 131). While the rebellion did not begin in Shi'a towns, it quickly spread to their areas and expanded. These incidents were then followed by the Kurdish uprising soon after, which although violent, finally led the Kurds to some form of autonomy from the Iraqi government. The rebellion in the south, on the other hand, resulted in the violent persecution of Ba'ath officials in the hands of the rebels. The Iraqi government reacted aggressively and crushed the revolt through mass killings, in which many innocent lives were lost.

In spite of the destruction, the Iraqis managed to rebuild the infrastructure and restore their cities to their original state. Six months after the war, communication, bridges and electricity were almost completely back to normal, but the Iraqi people still had to live through over a decade of sanctions that lasted until the beginning of the second Gulf war in 2003. The twelve years of sanctions left the Iraqis, a "once cultured and traveled people... isolated as never before" writes the Lebanese journalist Samia Nakhoul (158). The isolation from the world became an extension to the 1991 Gulf War, depriving the Iraqis from the settlement and development that they needed dearly after two disastrous wars.

### ***Iraq vs. The United States of America (2003)***

Still under the distress of the sanctions, Iraq was forced into a second Gulf war with the United States of America. If the first Gulf War was considered short, lasting only 43 days, the



second Gulf War lasted a mere 21 days. However, the war that began on March 19, 2003 ultimately changed Iraqi history. The United States claimed it had its reasons to engage in war with Iraq. The first reason was the United States War on Terror, which was meant to protect American soil and lives from another terrorist attack, like that of September 11, 2001. Furthermore, the Bush administration wanted to rid the world of Saddam Hussein and his threatening weapons of mass destruction. Under the name “Operation Iraqi Freedom,” the American army began its attack on Iraq full force. Once again the Iraqi infrastructure was attacked, in addition to all the official buildings that belonged to the Ba’ath regime. Ministries, palaces, bridges, civilian houses and shops were all targeted and destroyed. The skies over Baghdad were black with smoke that did not clear for weeks. The world watched as the American army advanced into Iraqi soil and finally reached Baghdad on April 9, 2003. On that same date the United States declared the fall of Baghdad and the Iraqi government under Saddam Hussein.

The country was suddenly left with no leadership, no army, and no security, which facilitated looting and vandalism. The looters, who were mostly impoverished citizens or ex-convicts “stole anything portable” (Keegan 206), and in the process, “enormous quantities of documents essential to the reorganization and reconstruction were irretrievably dispersed” (206). Sites like the Iraqi National Museum, libraries, universities, colleges and even hospitals were all raided, looted and some were eventually burned down. But the havoc did not stop there as the instability of power in Iraq led to the rise of organized insurgency that began to attack both the American troops and the representatives of the new Iraqi government. With the insurgency, suicide bombers and car bombings surfaced, which led to rapid rise in both the Iraqi and American death tolls (Keegan 211). Five years after the American invasion of Iraq there is still

no stability for the Iraqi people, as many cities still suffer from electricity outages, shortages in running water and energy resources for heating and cooking. In addition, the lack of security, especially in Baghdad, has led many Iraqis to flee the country in search of safety and stability.

The brief overview of Iraqi history should give readers an understanding about some of the topics that Dunya Mikhail engages in her poetry. The Iraqi people have lived through an upheaval of culture and way of life that Mikhail successfully illustrates in her work. Not only does she touch upon the issue of war, but also on the experience of exile that has forced Iraqis to gain new identities, such as Iraqi-American.

## CHAPTER 2 - Background

### “The Most Invisible of the Invisibles”

i am an arab,  
alienated from American,  
sitting on the other side of that hyphen  
-Laila Shereen

“The Most Invisible of the Invisibles” is a phrase coined by Joanna Kadi to define Arab-Americans in her book *Food for Our Grandmothers* (1994). While Kadi may have felt in the 1990s that Arab-Americans, who began to noticeably migrate to America in the late 1800s, were the least known ethnic group in the United States, the incidents of September 11, 2001 and the war in Iraq have made Americans much more aware of the “invisible” race among them. As the smoke of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon began to clear, it became known that the viscous attacks were executed by Arab Muslim extremists. Instead of fearing their lack of popularity, Arab-Americans became infamous overnight as the War on Terror commenced and they were placed under a microscope.

In the midst of the cataclysmic campaign that was instigated by the United States War on Terror, one positive aspect emerged: an interest in understanding the Arab-American identity. This interest has also led to the discovery of Arab-American literature, which “received scant critical treatment and remained on the outer margins of US literary studies” (Hassan 3) before the incidents of September 11. The majority of Arab-American literature has suffered because much of it has been written in Arabic and translated into English, which rendered it impure English literature by some literary critics. While translated poetry “has become an important

feature of Western modernism,” suggests Saadi Simawe, Associate Professor of English and Chair of the English Department at Grinnell College, in the introduction to *Iraqi Poetry Today* (2003), it is “a phenomenon that has not yet been significantly explored” (6). The lack of critical attention to Arab-American literature, is a point referred to by David Williams, in his essay “This Hyphen Called My Spinal Cord: Arab-American Literature at the Beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” (2007). He explains, “people read "ethnic" literature with very limited ideas about what they will find there. What does not confirm their prejudices, support their theories, or serve as background material for an issue that interests them may be overlooked or dismissed as irrelevant” (11). Nevertheless, he goes on to state that “Arab-American writers are becoming visible today as never before” (11). As they have the ability to shed light on their culture that has become a part of the greater American culture, which amalgamates so many other ethnicities like Native American, far Eastern, and African cultures. Through their writings, Arab-American writers have related their experiences coming to the shores of America, as in Ameen Rihani’s (1876-1940) novel *The Book of Khalid* (1911), which tells of the Syrian immigrant experience (Orfalea, *Grape Leaves* 3). While other writers like Ethel Adnan (also written Etel) (1925- ), an American of Lebanese origin, has dedicated a large portion of her work to the Lebanese civil war, which lasted fifteen years from 1975 to 1990 (85). Through such literary works the writers not only display certain incidents in the history of their native countries, but they also portray images of their journey to becoming American. These images are rich with Arab traditions and culture that these writers have managed to carry with them across the Atlantic Ocean to the shores of their new home in the United States.

This attention to Arab-American writers has been primarily concentrated on writers from Egyptian, Lebanese, and Palestinian origins. Salih J. Altoma, an Iraqi-American Professor

Emeritus of Arabic and Comparative Literature at Indiana University, points out in his essay “Iraqi Poets in Western Exile” (2003), “scant attention has been paid to the predicament of countless Iraqi poets who have been forced to live in exile all around the world” (37). It is Altoma’s contention that these poets have been overlooked in spite of their ability to offer a vivid picture of their experiences of dictatorship, war and distress over the past couple decades (37). Since the second Gulf war, Iraqi poets have begun to express,

not only their personal anguish and sense of loss but also, and perhaps more importantly, the ordeals, the humiliations, and the inhumane treatment to which Iraq and their fellow citizens have been subjected in recent decades. (38)

Therefore, the literature of Iraqi-Americans should be taken into consideration by literary critics, as it is an expression of the experiences that the Iraqi people endured throughout the Gulf wars and their aftermath. Their poetry allows us to witness the intensity of human loss of life, culture, and tradition. Dunya Mikhail is one of these Iraq-American writers who has received attention from the media in Iraq and the United States. However, her work, until now, has not been critically analyzed by Iraqi or American literary critics.

### **Dunya Mikhail: The Poet**

Hence the role of the poet is both response and responsibility.... The poet’s work must not only reflect his society’s aspirations, but attempt to be its window on a life, and aspire to lend dignity to its shattered landscape. He thus denies violence, despair, and death a monopoly of its soul.

-Fawaz Turki

Dunya Mikhail, one of the “War Generation” poets, began to publish poetry in Iraq in the mid-1980s. Her work portrays the Iraqi experience through thirty years of war, from the Iran-Iraq

War in the 1980s to the second Gulf war and its endless destructive aftermath. Mikhail's earlier works, like *Psalms of Absence* (1993) and *Almost Music* (1997), contain some reflections on the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, while *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea* (1995) is "a non-chronological diary....[that] represents fragments of what occurred, what was dreamt and what was recalled" (Ghazoul 1-2) during the first Gulf war and the sanctions that followed. Finally, her collection of poems titled *The War Works Hard*, which was published in Arabic in 2001, focuses on issues such as war and exile. Mikhail's poetry became known in the United States in 2005, after the publication of her translated and revised edition of *The War Works Hard* which received the PEN Translation Award in 2004.

Throughout Arab history, poetry has and "is the most revered and the most developed art form of the Arab peoples, occupying pride of place in a classical literary heritage" (Handal 1). Embracing this honored form, Mikhail has also renovated the genre of Arabic war poetry. In the introduction to *The War Works Hard*, Saadi Simawe states that instead "of employing slogans and dead metaphors..., political clichés...[and] classical metrical patterns" (vi, viii), Mikhail utilizes the form of Arabic free verse. This form of poetry was first used by the Iraqi poet Bader Shaker al-Sayyab in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to Arabic free verse pioneers, like al-Sayyab and Nazik al-Mala'ika, this form of poetry was a "realist poetry and a free one: realist, so that it could face the many problems; free, so that it could deal with them in a new creative way" (Boullata 251). Mikhail uses Arabic free verse in exactly this way to create "highly sensitive and surprising poetry" (Weissbort 270) that tackles the difficulties endured by the Iraqi people through wars, sanctions, repression and genocide.

The exiled poet was born in Baghdad in 1965, a time of political turmoil in Iraq, and was witness to two of the three wars in Iraq, the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) and the first Gulf War

(1991). She was forced to leave her country after increasing “systematic harassments from the [Iraqi] regime” (Simawe, *The War* vii). Mikhail recounts her experience:

I left Iraq in 1995, right after the publication of my “Diary of a Wave outside the Sea” [sic]. It was a text full of symbols and was critical of both the Iraqi regime and the allied forces. There were times before 1995 when I thought of escaping, but never did. The need did not seem that urgent yet. (Mikhail, Personal interview)

In her work, *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea* (1995), Mikhail implicitly points to Saddam Hussein and his followers and the destruction they have unleashed on the country and its people, when she writes: “He rounded up his followers to discuss with them/ the means of exterminating the human race” (41). While Mikhail did not refer to Hussein directly in this particular work, she was nevertheless harassed by the former Iraqi government. The writer speaks about the restrictions that poets face in Arab countries, “Arab leaders have been always aware that Arabic poetry has a great influence on the opinions of people; therefore, they, especially dictators, pay big awards and money to the poets who glorify them or glorify their deeds, and punish or kill those who criticize them” (Mikhail, Personal interview).

Mikhail grew up in constant fear of the governing regime under the leadership of Saddam Hussein and the Ba’ath Party, which in the words of Simawe:

waged to trounce the smallest pockets of popular resistance, [thus the poet’s] imagination was saturated with horror stories of imprisonment, torture, death, disappearances, massacres, and rape; she was surrounded by uprootedness and endless wars. (Simawe, *The War* ix)

While fear of Saddam’s regime was great, the actual threat to life came with the beginning of a chain of wars that affected the lives of every Iraqi. Mikhail was only fifteen at the beginning of

the Iran-Iraq war and she spent the next eight years under the sudden air raids of Iranian fighter jets and unpredictable bombings. Like other Iraqis, the relief she felt at the end of the eight-year war was short lived as Iraq plunged into another war, this time with the United States, after Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1991. The writer fled to Jordan and was able to travel to the United States in 1996, where she "earned a hyphen to [her] identity and became Iraqi-American" (Mikhail, Personal interview) in 2007 when she was granted American citizenship.

When asked about her decision to write about war, Mikhail claimed, "Why not war poetry when the war was (and is) all I saw, smelled, and heard. The war is the mess that I tried to shape or form in my writing. And poetry remains our best response to the catastrophe" (Mikhail, Personal interview). Through her work, Mikhail has managed to transport an image of war that is at times universal and at other times specific to the Iraqi experience of war. Her work moves her readers to the point that "one often encounters pain, anguish and dead ends" (Handal 23). Mikhail maintains that her "poems strive to seem 'cold' in the most intense situations" (Mikhail, Personal interview). It is the coolness of her approach to the intense topic of war that catches her readers off-guard and forces them to look a second time at the images of human distress she produces through her words.



## CHAPTER 3 - Criticism as a Form of Protest

another evening climbs  
the city's candles  
technological hoofs crush the night  
a people is being slaughtered across short waves:  
but local radio vomits raw statements  
and urges us to applaud

-Sinan Anton

Criticism is a foundational form of war protest in Mikhail's *The War Works Hard*. In her poetry, criticism appears as irony, rhetorical questions, sarcasm, and direct denunciation to show her female characters' disapproval of war. In the opening poem from *The War Works Hard* (2005), "Bag of Bones," the poet describes a woman at a mass graveyard site searching for the bones of her loved one. The reader witnesses the woman's experience as she searches for the remains of her husband, son or lover, among so many others searching for the bones of their own loved ones with "trembling hands" in a place "noisy with skulls and bones and dust" (3). Mikhail begins the poem with a lively and optimistic tone by exclaiming: "What good luck!" (3), she follows, however, with "She has found his bones. / The skull is also in the bag" (3). The opening optimism is thus replaced with the irony of the woman's sense of luck as she completes the gathering of her loved one's bones and places them in a bag. The above scene described by Mikhail in "Bag of Bones" recalls one of the many unnerving incidents that took place after the second Gulf war. Twelve years after the 1991 rebellious outbreak in southern Iraq, American and allied investigators found 62 mass graveyard sites, in which thousands of Iraqis were either executed or buried live by the former Iraqi regime (Schmitt 1). However, even without the reader's knowledge of these incidents, the poet's sarcastic tone startles the reader's senses to the

actual tragedy that lies in the ironic happiness that the woman feels at finding a loved one's bones. Instead of happiness at finding him alive, Mikhail's woman has settled for finding her executed loved one's bones so she can, at least, bury him properly and attain a measure of peace for both herself and her loved one.

Mikhail's criticism of war in "Bag of Bones" is also found in her use of rhetorical questions that the narrator directs to the remains of the victim:

What does it mean to die all this death  
in a place where the darkness plays all this silence?  
What does it mean to meet all your loved ones now  
with all of these hollow places? (3)

Although the poet's questions cannot be answered by the victim, the questions produce an image, for the reader, of the scene at the graveyard site. The poet assumes that there are no survivors to tell of the story of their brutal execution, therefore the questions allow the readers to imagine for themselves what the victim went through, without actually presenting descriptions: to die among so many others, yet alone because his loved ones are far away, to die in darkness and silence, and to meet his loved one in the hollowness of the graves filled with bones.

However, the strength in Mikhail's "Bag of Bones" lies in her ability to portray the magnitude of loss that the mother endures with the loss of her son, without using exact words to describe the mother's painful experience. She narrates:

To give back to your mother  
on the occasion of death  
a handful of bones  
she had given to you

on the occasion of birth? (3-4)

The reader does not encounter words that reflect the mother's actual grief; there is no reference to the mother's weeping or mourning. Instead, we find images like the victim's mother being presented with her son's bones in return for the gift of life she presented to him at birth. The contrasting theme of birth and death portrayed by Mikhail as the grim exchange of "gifts" between a mother and her son, emphasizes the horrific loss due to war. Instead of Mother's day and birthday gifts of flowers and chocolate, the mother in this poem is forced to search for her son's bones among the "thousands of [other] bones" (3). Moreover, the lines concentrate on the role of the woman or mother as a symbol of creation, who always gives the gift of life. The bones that she gives to her child are symbols of life and the love that she bears for him.

The dead son in the poem, on the other hand, is only capable of giving his mother his bones, which she has to dig from the dirt. Mikhail's criticism of war in this section of the poem is also a criticism of the role of men in war, as they are the soldiers and the leaders who perpetrate loss and desolation in war. Although the character who is being questioned is a victim of war, the poet alludes to the idea that the role played by men in war leads to suffering and death, which is represented in the son's gift of bones to his mother. War has forced him to return to his mother as "a handful" of bones, thus adding to his mother's loss, who is unable to bury the complete remains of her son. Hence, through the image of men being the givers and creators of death, Mikhail contrasts the majority of Iraqi war literature written by men that provides a positive image of the Iraqi male soldier that is all sacrificing. According to Mikhail, the men's sacrifice of themselves in war is a negative outcome for the woman in her poem who are left with the lifeless bones of their sons, husbands or lovers.

Furthermore, through her criticism of war in “Bag of Bones” Mikhail successfully disrupts the image of patriotic motivations for heroic battles found in the majority of Iraqi war literature, as she “persistently unmask[s] the official glorification of war by trenchantly highlighting the shattered humanity” (Simawe, *The War* viii). The poet releases the mother or lover in her poem from the limited role of the patriotic, encouraging character by allowing her to face the reality of war on the men’s battleground and far from the safe borders of her home. Mikhail boldly forces her protagonist to dig, search for, and finally hold her loved one’s skull in order to erase any doubt in both her character’s and her reader’s mind that war can be anything but vicious. Through the image of a woman searching for her son’s or lover’s bones, “all the propaganda of politics disappear” (Philbin 2) as the poet discredits war and uncovers the bitter reality of death and loss produced by it.

Another form of criticism of war in “Bag of Bones” is Mikhail’s criticism of the Iraqi government that contributed to the civilian death toll through mass killings of alleged traitors. Anyone that the Iraqi government suspected of disloyalty disappeared only to be found in one of the mass burial sites after the fall of regime in 2003, as “repression of dissenters and rebellious groups remains key to the regime’s grip on power” (Worsnip 53). According to the “Human rights groups, which have tried to document the carnage for years, estimate ... nearly 300,000 Iraqis are missing and were probably executed” (Sachs 1) over the 35-year reign of the former Iraqi government. No one was safe from the arbitrary arrests and killings of Saddam’s government, as they,

killed in purges aimed at specific political opposition groups, like the Communists, and it killed to suppress the political ambitions of the Shiite Muslim majority. It killed the relatives of dissidents, Muslim clerics and Christians whose loyalty was suspect. It killed

Kurds, with bullets and poison gas, in a wholesale campaign meant to subdue an entire ethnic group. (Sachs 1)

The poet goes on to directly criticize the Iraqi government and the former Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein, for the brutal death of his people when she states, “The dictator is the director of a great tragedy” (4). The tragedy that the dictator has directed, according to Mikhail, confines in Hussein’s brutality against his people. Thus, adding to the devastation of the war-ridden Iraqis. However, the former leader is not the only one criticized by Mikhail, as she points to his followers or his “audience” (4), as the poet calls them, that also have the blood of Iraqis on their hands. They are “an audience that claps/ until the bones begin to rattle” (4). These lines portray an uncanny image of bones protesting their unjust execution by rattling, while Saddam’s followers give him undeserved admiration. Also, Mikhail suggests that there is a tragedy even worse than the Iraqi people’s execution, which is that Saddam deprives the families of the executed the right of knowing that their loved ones have been killed. She sarcastically states, “the dictator does not give receipts/ when he takes your life” (4), instead the executed person disappears “without death or birth certificates” (4) as if he was never even born. The poet displays for the reader the injustice that the Iraqis went through under the reign of the dictator. After all their trials through war, they are rewarded with the death penalty and erased from any documents that proved their existence.

In addition to alluding to Saddam’s executions of his own people, Mikhail points out that he also forced them to fight wars in the name of patriotism and the liberation of the Arab nation. While the dictator “has a skull,” the narrator explains that, it is “not like any other skull,” as it is capable of solving a “math problem/ that multiplied the one death by millions / to equal the homeland” (4). Under the slogans of justified wars, Saddam drove his people into three wars that

resulted in millions of casualties. Mikhail gives voice of protest to the women in her poem and, in turn, to her own protest through them by criticizing war and the former Iraqi regime and its thirst for power and control.

The criticism of war in the last lines of the poem is a criticism of the affect that war has on people and their relationship with each other. Mikhail ends “Bag of Bones” with the lines, “the full bag finally in her hand,/ unlike her disappointed neighbor/ who has not yet found her own” (4). The protagonist has finally completed the collection of all of her loved one’s bones. Ironically, even in the gloominess of the situation, the protagonist is able to compare her own luck to her neighbor’s unluckiness in finding the remaining bones of her loved one. Not only is the woman relieved at finding her loved one’s bones, but also that she is able to do so even when her neighbor could not. The protagonist has discarded the feelings of sympathy she has for her neighbor and seems more interested in her sense of accomplishment at being able to find her loved one’s bones before her neighbor does so. While the interpretation of the concluding lines of the poem may seem harsh, the poet does not portray these women, who have suffered the same tragedy, to be assisting each other in their time of loss. Instead, they dig for their loved ones alone, without contemplating the emotional needs of each other. Mikhail criticizes the degradation of human relations as the two women seem to compete to find their loved ones’ bones. Thus Mikhail’s work shows that war not only threatens the lives of people, but it also leads to the loss of compassion among those who live through it.

Unlike “Bag of Bones,” the title poem “The War Works Hard,” does not have a female character to protest war; instead, Mikhail uses her own voice to condemn it. While the poet does use a sarcastic tone to criticize war and its destructive features, her protest is direct criticism of war. She explains her release from the limitations brought on by fear when writing about war or

about the Iraqi government that promotes it: “In Iraq, I was using figures of speech, symbols and a lot of layers in my writings to avoid the interpretations of censors. After I left Iraq, I didn’t feel the need for those symbols. My writing became more direct” (Mikhail, Personal interview).

Thus, Mikhail’s ability to express, in her own voice, objection of war is conveyed through her poem “The War Works Hard,” as she documents her own protest of war.

The tone of sarcasm used by Mikhail as a form of criticism of war in her title poem, “The War Works Hard,” begins with what the reader may assume is praise of war, “How magnificent the war is! / How eager / and efficient!” (6). However, the poet captures the reader’s attention as she begins to list the ways in which it is presumably “magnificent” (6), the reader is led to perceive an opposite image, as in the following lines:

Early in the morning,  
it wakes up the sirens  
and dispatches ambulances  
to various places,  
swings corpses through the air,  
rolls stretches to the wounded,  
summons rain  
from the eyes of mothers,  
digs into the earth  
dislodging many things  
from under the ruins...  
Some are lifeless and glistening,  
others are pale and still throbbing... (6)

In the lines above, “war” is personified as a powerful and destructive being that is far from magnificent. War’s only efficiency lies in its ability to initiate pain and obliterate the optimism of a new day with images of displacement, ruins, lifelessness and the paleness of the dying bodies. Ironically, the images of a morning routine and wakening, which represent life and its continuity, become connected with sirens, ambulances and corpses, and thus death. Even the image of rain, which again, represents life, is disrupted by its comparison to mothers’ tears over the death of her children.

Furthermore, the poet concentrates on words like “morning,” “rain,” “digs,” “sows,” and “reaps.” Thus, the war’s hard work is comparable to that of an assiduous farmer, who also wakes early in the morning to dig, sow and reap his crops. Mikhail describes war saying, “It’s like a person that lives with us....it’s like a person that works hard [sic]” (Potter 2). However, while the farmer labors to give life, war’s only eagerness is in taking life.

Throughout the poem, Mikhail sarcastically praises war and its productive influences:

It inspires tyrants

to deliver long speeches,

awards medals to generals

and themes to poets.

It contributes to the industry

of artificial limbs,

provides food for flies, [...]

builds new houses for the orphans (6-7)

Through the use of an ironic tone, which mockingly praises the influences of war, the poet allows the reader to realize the artificiality of those who lead it. Mikhail uncovers the lies that



their propaganda hides behind, such as the patriotic speeches and the medals that are awarded to its participants. The actual contributions that war makes are of mutilation and death that ultimately lead to the fragmentation of families and life. Mikhail's "vision" in this poem, suggests Saadi Simawe, "is unparalleled in its quiet and therefore more effective subversion of war ideologies, in which the staunchest warmonger usually hides behind the thickest rhetoric of peace and humanity" (*The War* x). The poet moves, alternately, from her criticism of war to criticizing those who provoke it by presenting the leader as an overseer of "war" who is happy with the fatal outcome that his war has created. With all the hard work that "war" has done through killing and destruction, it has managed to paint a content "smile on the leader's face" (7). Finally, after all the mocking praise of war, the poet sarcastically states, "The war works with unparalleled diligence! / Yet no one gives it / a word of praise" (7). Mikhail confirms through her description of the diligent war that she is actually another one of those who refuse to "[give] it / a word of praise" (7), as all that she describes in her poem adds to the destructive image of war.

Mikhail's own voice in "The War Works Hard" is another female voice of protest against war. As a writer she is one of the many women featured in her poetry, as she conveys, "I find that the woman in my writing have these roles: a prisoner's mother, a mother carrying her son's bones, a goddess, a snow-woman, a lover, a fortune-teller, and a nun" (Mikhail, Personal interview). Thus, Mikhail adds herself to the list of women in her work as a writer who protests war and criticizes its inhumanity.

Direct criticism is also found in Mikhail's poem "Inanna," in which she criticizes war through the character of the goddess Inanna. Mikhail defines Inanna in her notes as a "Sumerian goddess of love, fertility, procreation, and war; the first goddess of recorded history" (*The War*

77). Inanna or Ishtar , as she was named by the Akkadians, “is the most important goddess of the Sumerian pantheon in ancient Mesopotamia” (Lindemans 1). Inanna “was known as the Queen of Heaven and Earth and was responsible for the growth of plants and animals and fertility in humankind” (Wolkstein xvi). However, due to her journey to the underworld, “she took on the powers and mysteries of death and rebirth” (xvi). The poet chooses Inanna, the goddess who “overshadowed” and “outlasted” (xv) all other deities known to the Sumerians, as a representative of Iraqi women. This choice shows the poet’s assertion that Iraqi women have the power, not only to protest war, but also to outlast its annihilation.

The poem begins quietly, with the goddess’s seemingly simple introduction: “I am Inanna. / And this is my city” (11). Mikhail ruptures the image of men leading and, supposedly, protecting the country by making Inanna, a female figure, proclaim her rule, “this is my city” (11). As an overseer, Inanna is a witness to what the war has done to her city. She reflects:

Here, sometime ago,  
someone was asking for help  
shortly before his death [...]  
Palm trees  
were about to whisper something to me  
before they were beheaded  
like some foreigners in my country.  
I see my old neighbors  
on the TV  
running from bombs,  
sirens

and Abu Al-Tubar. (11)

The poet criticizes the war's aftermath, which is just as threatening to the victims of war as the bombings announced by sirens. In the aftermath of war the Iraqis become victims to new ways of killing, like the beheadings by extremist groups. Through Inanna, Mikhail refers to "Abu Al-Tubar," a serial killer named "The Hatchet Man" (Mikhail 77), who robbed houses and hacked the families to death in Baghdad in the 1970s (al-Khalil 7). Mikhail compares the gangs that appeared after the 2003 war to the notorious Hatchet Man and his group who killed without reason.

However, the poet's criticism in "Inanna" is not confined to the extremists who rose after the war, as she points to the other aspects that took place during and after the second Gulf war. The narrator refers to the looting of the Iraqi National Museum:

I see the antiquities  
scattered  
and broken  
in the museum.

My necklaces are among them. (12)

The poet points out that it is not only death that has ravished her country, but also the loss of thousands of years of "scattered / and broken" (12) history. The concern over the loss is deeper than the material value of the historical relics that date back to 3000 B.C., as the irretrievable "antiquities" become symbols of the culture that has been shattered by the aftermath of war.

In addition, the accused has also "planted pomegranates and prisons" in the goddess's country and filled these prisons with prisoners. While the planting of the "pomegranates" may seem to the western reader as a positive act, "pomegranate," according to the Iraqi reader, is a

slang word for grenade or bomb. Therefore the perpetrator is actually planting bombs and adding to the destruction that is already there. Moreover, in these lines, pomegranate becomes a metaphor for the prisons that have become crowded and bloody with torture. Like the pomegranate that is round, red and crowded with seeds, the prisons have also become “round, red and full” (12) with prisoners.

While the poet does not directly state who is guilty of the above accusations, it is assumed that she is alluding to the invading American troops who allowed the destruction of the Iraqi National Museum and filled the prisons with Iraqi captives. The proof that Inanna is actually accusing the American army is found in lines: “How you disturb my sleep / and frighten a flock of kisses / out of my nation!” (12). The protagonist’s use of “my nation” rather than “our nation” suggests that she does not consider the intruder to be a part of her country. Thus, Mikhail’s criticism branches out to include all those who contribute to warfare, including her own people represented in the former Iraqi regime, others who use the war as a means to gain economic and political power, and, finally, the American troops.

Mikhail further emphasizes her protest of war in the poem “Inanna” through the irony of the goddess herself who represents war, but at the same time narrates her protest against it. Even the goddess of war is protesting the war against the Iraqi people, as she finds it to be unjust. Inanna, thus, represents the Iraqi woman who protests against a war that has turned her people against each other. Inanna is no longer a bystander as she is outraged by the fighting that is disrupting her country and she is forced to intervene by voicing her protest:

I yell at you:

Behave you sons of the dead!

Stop fighting

over my clothes and gold!  
How you disturb my sleep  
and frighten a flock of kisses  
out of my nation! (12)

The subtle criticism found in the beginning of the poem is transformed to clear, direct and loud protest of war by a powerful figure who scolds her people and the invaders, as she tells them to cease their battles over material possessions.

The goddess, Inanna, is also the connection between the past and present, as she watched over her people before the destruction of war and is now witnessing their obliteration in modern times of war. In addition, Inanna can be seen as the poet herself, as we find that like the poet, the goddess has left her country and can only witness its demolition from the television screen (11). The goddess, like the poet has left the threatening atmosphere of war and is now in a calm place where her “new neighbors” (11) are “running/ for their morning exercises” (11) oblivious of the incidents that are happening on the other side of the world. The goddess and the poet become one as they witness the tragedies that they can no longer prevent. Their only power lies in their words. Consequently, as the goddess can only yell at the images in the computer or on the television screen, the poet can only write these words of protest. However, it is these words of protest that will be heard and read. Although both the poet and the goddess have no physical power to cease the war, their actual power lies in their ability to voice their disapproval of war and the destruction it causes.

Mikhail takes her disapproval of war one step further in her poem “An Urgent Call” by directly and openly criticizing one of its contributors. In this poem, the poet condemns the actions of the American woman soldier Lynndie England, who was charged with abusing Iraqi

detainees in the Iraqi prison Abu Ghraib. England was one of several American soldiers seen in the pictures that CBS News broadcast on April 28, 2004 (Carter 1). The humiliating pictures reveal the sexual, physical, and mental torture of Iraqi prisoners. The incident affected the Iraqi and Arab society greatly as the pictures uncovered the brutal and degrading interrogation tactics used by the American army against unarmed detainees, some of whom were teenagers, women and elderly men (Hersh 1). In "An Urgent Call," Mikhail faces England woman to woman, without taking into consideration the latter's status as an American soldier. The poet calls upon England without fear or hesitation, bidding her to leave the war scene and go home: "This is an urgent call / for the American soldier Lynndie / to immediately return to her homeland" (13). According to the poet, England's role in the war has ended. The soldier who came to liberate a people from the tortures of a dictator seems to have betrayed the Iraqi people's faith in her cause. More importantly, England has betrayed Mikhail's designation of women as symbols of life and nurturing. For even while England "is pregnant," (13) she has demoralized the symbol of life she represents as a woman. The poet reminds the soldier of the role she has betrayed and this reproach becomes a universal protest against war. In "Baghdad Burning: Women Write War in Iraq" (2007), Cooke analyzes the poem stating:

An Iraqi woman names an American woman, and we are no longer in the space of the abstract where causes, cruelty, and absurd justifications for violence flourish. The recognition of the humanity [sic] of the torturer echoes across time and space in the call for an end to the senselessness of war. (5-6)

The protest against England becomes a protest against the institutions of war that lead to this change in human nature, through which, even a woman, a breeder of life, becomes a symbol of torture, malice, and death.

Later in the poem, Mikhail emphasizes the contradictory images of the role of women and men by telling England:

Don't worry,  
nobody will force you  
to feed the birds  
when you carry a gun.  
Nobody will for you  
to work for the environment  
when you wear combat boots. (13)

Mikhail again shows the life-giving role that a woman symbolizes through the images of feeding the birds and caring for the environment; a role that England refuses to embody. England's choice to "carry a gun" and "wear army boots" reflects her inclination to take life instead of give it, which is a role that Mikhail connects to the role of men in war. Through this contradiction of roles between men and woman, the poet emphasizes the point that women are "expected to be against war and violence.... [While men] start the wars; women try to stop them" (Sjoberg 98). Mikhail is not suggesting that women do not have a role as soldiers and defenders, but that their role should be to promote life not death and suffering.

While the whole poem "An Urgent Call" is seen as criticism of Lynndie's atrocious actions, the poet's condemnation of these actions is strongest when she tells England:

Take a sick leave  
and release your baby  
from your body,  
but don't forget

to hide those terrible pictures,  
the pictures of you dancing in the mud.  
Keep them away  
from his or her eyes.  
Hide them, please.  
You don't want your child to cry out:  
The prisoners are naked... (14)

Mikhail warns England that even her own child, while still a baby, is going to protest against his mother's brutality when he sees the "terrible pictures" of his mother "dancing in the mud" (14), enjoying the pain that she is causing other human beings. The poet asks England to hide the pictures from his or her innocent eyes as he or she, even while an infant, understands the magnitude of his mother's wrong doing and as he or she cries "The prisoners are naked" (14).

Sarcastically, the narrator tells England that even if she has to leave the Abu Ghraib prison, she will be able to continue her torture of other prisoners elsewhere: "Don't worry, / you will not lose your job / there are prisoners everywhere" (13). Mikhail points to the notion that it is in England's nature to subject pain. Furthermore, the fact remains that no one seems to care for the crime that this American soldier has committed against the Iraqi people, as "a senior general in Iraq had pointed [after the incident] that the abused detainees were 'only' Iraqis" (Hersh 1). Mikhail goes on to describe the "prisons with big black holes" (13), in which the Iraqi prisoners experienced:

great shivering,  
and consecutive flashes,  
and tremblings that convey messages



with no language

in a blind galaxy. (13)

The pictures of the Abu Ghraib prisoners were images without sound, “with no language” (13), but no language is needed to communicate the shocking, unjust torture and dehumanization shown in them. Also, the torture of the prisoners only results in incomprehensible utterances of pain that can be understood in any language. Hence, once again the poet suggests that such brutality is an issue that is not just limited to this particular war and it is the responsibility of all humanity to open their “blind” eyes to the realities of war and its influence on people. While the criticism in this poem is directed to a specific person, Mikhail manages to display her protest of war by including indirect criticism of the institutions that allow for such degradation of mankind.

In her poem “To Any Other Place,” Mikhail personifies war in the character of Red Mother. Red Mother is confronted “face to face” (29) by Brown Mother, who represents the “regular Iraqi mother” (Mikhail, Personal interview). Red Mother is specifically a personification of “the “mother of all battles” [as the] 1991 US-allied war on Iraq was called by the then Iraqi regime” (Mikhail, Personal interview). The poet’s description of the Red Mother is in itself criticism of war, “With her unkempt hair/ and her repugnant smell/ and her fleeing children” (29). Red Mother’s appearance is that of a disheveled woman who is unable to care for herself or for her children, who run away from her; and like the war she represents, she reeks of death and chaos. Red Mother opens the conversation by exclaiming to Brown Mother: “How much I hate you! / Your beginning is my end” (29). Red Mother realizes that Brown Mother’s essentialist image of womanhood, which represents life and creation, is against Red Mother’s desires of destruction. However, instead of the passive representation of the Iraqi mother, Mikhail’s Brown Mother confronts Red Mother by displaying what the perpetrator and her

children have done: “Your sons, the battles, / shatter the glass of our windows / and terrify my sleeping daughters” (29). The Iraqi mother in this poem is no longer a reflection of the “patriotic symbol” (Cooke, *Women* 234) found in the majority of Iraqi war literature. On the contrary, Mikhail’s Iraqi mother uses her power and courage to face war instead of encouraging it.

Later in the poem, Red Mother invites Brown Mother to join the celebration of war telling her:

Let us celebrate every year  
the steps which have diminished  
and the pairs of shoes that have remained  
there in the mud. (29)

Red Mother wants to celebrate the destruction that has happened to both the people and the buildings. The steps of Iraqi’s progress have “diminished” due to the destruction brought on by war. Moreover, there are no more people left to rebuild what has been demolished, as they have fled leaving the place desolate with “pairs of shoes” and mud to replace the buildings that have crumbled. Red Mother not only thirsts for war, but also relishes in the destruction it causes, to the point that she wants to celebrate the anniversary of war each year.

However, Brown Mother protests the celebrations:

This rhythm  
does not please me,  
and these drums make the din  
of emptiness. (29)

Brown Mother criticizes Red Mother’s need to celebrate war stating that the rhythm is not that of celebrations, instead, the beat produced by the drums of war echoes the emptiness that war

creates. War takes people's lives and destroys everything in its path, leaving nothing but emptiness. However, Brown Mother's strongest protest of war is in her claim: "I want to move my daughters / to another place, / to any other place..." (30). In these lines, Mikhail rejects the image of the Iraqi woman who is willing to sacrifice herself and her children for the sake of war. Brown Mother's mere intention of leaving the war scene, with her daughters, suggests her refusal to support a war that feeds off her people. She is not the only one moving, as she takes the next generation of women, her daughters, with her. They will be raised far from war and the need to support it. Thus, "To Any Other Place" shows Iraqi women's criticism of war through contrasting the blood thirsty intentions of Red Mother (war) with the peace-seeking, gentleness of Brown Mother (the Iraqi Mother).

Furthermore, Mikhail places emphasis on the genders of the children in the poem, hence, promoting her view of the contradictory roles played by men and women in warfare. While Brown Mother's children are girls who seek peace, Red Mother's children are boys who engage in war. Generally, it is understood that it is the role of the man to fight wars in order to protect the woman. Laura Sjoberg comments on this issue in *Gender, Justice, and the Wars in Iraq*, stating: "Traditionally, maleness is associated with war-fighting and femaleness is associated with the need for protection" (97). However, the sons of Red Mother are far from being protectors. They can only inflict damage and terror. Red Mother's narration emphasizes this point when she states:

I want firewood...firewood...

I want to feed my sons,

I want them to grow up

And devour your daughters, the peace. (29)

Red Mother openly defines Brown Mother's daughters as symbols of peace that she wishes to destroy. She considers Brown Mother's daughters, or the "regular Iraqi mother[s]" (Mikhail, Personal interview), a threat to her accomplishments of war. The poet, then, depicts a cannibalistic image of war through illustrating Red Mother's need to feed her sons on Brown Mother's daughters and the peace they represent.

Through Brown Mother's reply, the image of the hungry savage persists as she points out to Red Mother:

I raise my daughters for roses  
and you raise your sons for ashes.  
The fire breaks out  
and the dancing will start around it.  
The fire is not satisfied  
and the dance does not end. (29)

Once again Mikhail bestows the women in her poetry the symbol of life. Brown Mother's daughters are raised for "roses": a symbol beauty, love and life. On the other hand, Red Mother's sons are raised for death represented in the "ashes" that are produced by their fires. The fire that Brown Mother continues to describe is pictured as a kind of bonfire around which people dance in celebration, but the fire seems to grow in size as its appetite is never tamed. Like the fire, the dancing which symbolizes the fighting never ceases because Red Mother's sons thrive on the war and the fires it generates. While the conversation in the poem is between two female figures, Mikhail also points to the masculinity of war and criticizes men's need for power through the portrayal of Red Mother's sons. At the same time, she shows women's need for peace and their willingness to break from the images set by their predecessors in search for a peaceful life.

Mikhail's women protest war and its savageness, by criticizing its destruction and its degradation of human relations and ideals, as it separates families and loved ones. The women in these poems have found a way to voice their protest of war, as they confront the many faces of war, be it in the form of a dictator, a corrupt soldier or a personification of war itself. They do so while still maintaining their essential image of womanhood that refuses to be bound by passiveness.

## CHAPTER 4 - De-Fragmentation as a Form of Protest

I drew a door  
to sit behind, ready  
to open the door  
as soon as you arrive.

-Dunya Mikhail

In their first stage of protest, Mikhail's women criticize the leaders and participants of war. Through the criticism of war they uncover its ugliness and they confront it as they abandon their passive roles as bystanders. However, these women take protest a step further by mentally de-fragmenting the fragmentation and loss that war has instituted in their lives. By doing so, her women refuse to comprehend war's powerful control over them. Moreover, women in Mikhail's poetry deny war its ability to separate them from their loved ones as they refuse to understand the loss that it has created. In "The Prisoner," Mikhail presents a mother preparing to part with her son, who has been found guilty. While the son's imprisonment is certainly difficult for the mother to bare, the son's incarceration becomes more severe when it is interpreted within the context of war poetry, as the ordinary prisoner is seen as a prisoner of war. From the first line, "She doesn't understand/ what it means to be 'guilty'" (9), Mikhail sets the tone of the protagonist in the poem. The prisoner's mother does not have trouble understanding the meaning of guilt, however she is unable to comprehend it when it is connected to her son. As the idea of misunderstanding is repeated throughout the poem, the reader begins to realize that the mother's is incapable of comprehending anything that detaches her from her son.

Although the mother “waits at the prison entrance” (9) to see him enter the prison gates, she remains in denial of the fact that he will soon be separated from her. It is the idea of denying the obvious and refusing to understand her son’s imprisonment that establishes the mother’s intent of de-fragmenting her isolation from her son. Consequently, as the poem proceeds, it becomes more clear that the mother is willingly refusing to understand her son’s departure. She eagerly “waits at the prison entrance” (9) to see her son in order to assure him of her presence by telling him, “Take care of yourself” (9). The simple words are connected in the mother’s mind to the ordinary everyday outings that her son went on before his captivity:

As she always used to remind him  
when he went off to school,  
when he left for work,  
when he returned while on vacation. (9)

The above lines also suggest the mother’s anticipation of his return home, as she connects his absence to the times he had left for school as a child or to work as a man. The poet implies that the son always returned after those times of separation from his mother. However, now, due to his confinement, he is unable to return home, a fact that she refuses to comprehend. At the same time, she re-visions her son’s inevitability to return to her, as he had always done before his captivity.

The de-fragmentation also seems to displace the mother from her surroundings, as there is a sense of loneliness that envelops the character who is lost within the memories of her son and her longing for his freedom once again. Everything seems distant, to the point that she cannot even distinguish what the officers are saying concerning her son:

She doesn’t understand

what they are saying now  
at the back of the podium  
in their official uniforms. (9)

While it may be that the mother is unable to hear the conversation between the officers due to their distance, the inability to understand the officer's speech could be due to the possibility that they speak a language foreign to the mother. The ambiguity of the officer's identity leaves room for the reader to interpret who they might be. Mikhail suggests that the officers might be of different nationality than the woman, as she cannot understand their speech—a point that adds to the interpretation of the prisoner as a POW. However, in both readings of this section of poem, the mother's inability to understand lies in her refusal to comprehend her son's containment away from her.

To emphasize the de-fragmentation, the mother in Mikhail's poem recalls the intimate moments between her and her child, such as singing "lullabies on his bed/ in those distant days" (9). Through the memories of her son's childhood, which relate to his innocence both as a child and a prisoner, the poet stresses the mother's refusal to believe that he is guilty of any crime. It is incomprehensible for her to realize that he will be kept in prison "with lonely strangers....without windows or moons" (9). The mother can only think of how her son is entrapped in a windowless, moonless cell that offers no comfort and no lullabies that signify her love and care. Furthermore, through recalling the moments of bonding between herself and her child, the mother leaves no room for the concept of separation from her son. The mother's memories assist in de-fragmenting her loss, thus protesting the institutions of war that have led to such injustice.



Mikhail's character in "The Prisoner" does not verbalize her protest, but her refusal to understand that she has to leave him becomes a protest in itself:

She doesn't understand,  
the prisoner's mother doesn't understand  
why she should leave him  
just because  
"the visit is over." (9)

Unlike the mothers in most Iraqi war literature, who accept separation from their loved ones for the sake of patriotism, Mikhail's woman refuses even the thought of departing from her son. The officer's announcement: "the visit is over" (9), does not make sense to her. In her mind, it is not enough to make her leave her son in this place far from home. The writer forsakes the theme of the courageous, strong mother who pushes her son to sacrifice his freedom for his beliefs. Instead she presents a mother who is aware that her son's imprisonment is wrong, as she de-fragments the separation through her refusal to accept any notion other than the idea that he will return to her.

Another poem that deals with the concept of de-fragmentation as a form of protest in Mikhail's *The War Works Hard* is "The Cup." The poem was originally from her collection of poems *Almost Music* (1997). In this poem, Mikhail depicts a woman who refuses to accept that her husband has been killed in combat. The woman goes to the extreme of using a coffee cup on an Ouija board to communicate with the spirit of her dead husband. Although the woman knows that her husband is dead when she asks him, "Are you truly my husband, the martyr?" (51), she persists in questioning the spirit:

She said: Why did you leave me so soon?

The cup moved to the letters—

IT WAS NOT IN MY HANDS.

She said: Why didn't you escape?

The cup moved to the letters—

I ESCAPED.

She said: Then how were you killed?

The cup moved—FROM BEHIND. (51)

The woman asks the spirit of her husband for details of his death as if to convince herself that he was actually killed. Her inability to accept her husband's death also mirrors her inability to accept the war that led to his martyrdom. However, even after her husband's spirit relates how he was killed she goes on to ask him:

Can I make you stay here?

The cup moved to the left for NO.

She said: Can I come with you?

The cup moved to the left. (51)

The woman does not understand why she has to be separated from her husband. Consequently, through her questioning, the woman refuses the fact that war has led to this separation. While her questions are futile, her insistence shows that she does not want to recognize their separation from each other. Additionally, she does not even acknowledge the movement of the cup to the left, as she refuses the indication of a negative answer to her question "Can I come with you?" (51), which is apparent.

After a number of questions the spirit ceases to answer. The woman surrenders to the spirit's silence and calls her son "who [is] in the garden catching insects / with a helmet full of

holes” (52). Through the image of the “helmet full of holes” in the last line, the certainty of the husband’s death is undeniable. The son is playing with his father’s helmet, which is full of bullet holes. Therefore, the helmet is tangible evidence of the husband’s death. The helmet also confirms that the wife knows her husband has been killed and the conversation with his spirit only shows her refusal to accept this fact.

The women in “The Prisoner” and “The Cup” are two depictions of loss that the Iraqi mothers and wives endured during and after the war. While these characters are left unaided to deal with their loss, they find the means to protest it through de-fragmentation and their refusal accept the separation from their loved ones. This is found through the mother’s wish for her son to “take care” (9) as if he will go on with his normal, daily life outside the prison gates. It is also found in the image of the martyr’s wife, who still includes her husband in her future plans and personal decisions. The prisoner’s mother and the martyr’s wife are women who are faced with loss. According to them, however, it seems that as long as they do not comprehend or believe this loss, they will still be able to hold on to their loved ones, thus rendering war’s powers futile.

## CHAPTER 5 - Recollection as a Form of Protest

I am a flower unwithered by autumn's desert winds.  
I am a branch unbroken by winter's storms.  
I am a dream that does not end by waking.  
I am weak, but the strong cannot devour me.  
I find strength in my weakness.

-Murad Mikha'il

Dunya Mikhail's protest of war in *The War Works Hard* does not end with the direct criticism of war or the de-fragmentation of its destruction. The writer allows her women to further protest war by giving them the ability to recollect all that war has fragmented. Their ability to recollect the memories and remains of loved ones portrays the women's final stage of protest. War, is therefore, no longer capable of fragmenting their lives. Hence, it cannot control them and must inevitably end. The women in Mikhail's poetry have found the power to overcome the bitter fate brought on by war by finding a means to survive it. While other Iraqi writers have shown women capable of surviving the brutality of war, they have done so within the frame of patriotism and the sense that nothing can hinder the Iraqi willingness to survive. Stories written during the Iran-Iraq war, such as Ali Lufta Sa'id's story "A Woman among Women" (1988) shows a mother who "preaches patient acceptance of God's will and tolerates no expressions of grief or pain" (Cooke, *Women* 225), even when her two oldest sons and her husband are brought back home on biers. Iraqi writers even went further, as in Raja' al-Buhaysh's story "Tales of Iraqi Suns" (1982), in which the protagonist encourages her grandson to enlist in the army so he can have the opportunity to be as heroic as his grandfather was during the 1920 Iraqi revolution against the British occupancy (235). These examples show that women are capable of dealing with tragedy and are even prepared to face loss for the sake of their

country. Mikhail's women abandon patriotism, however, as they recollect memories and pieces of their lives which have been shattered by war. The women, not the men in these poems are the ones that recollect life, or what is left of it, and move on. They learn to live after the destruction and death, even without their men. Not only are they recollecting, but also showing the warmongers that war can no longer thrive in a community that refuses to acknowledge it.

For instance, the protagonist in "Bag of Bones" embodies the role of recollection. The recollection in this poem is physical, as in the recollecting of the victim's bones and emotional as seen in the memories that the woman has of her loved one. In the beginning of the poem, the narrator does not relate any characteristics of the murdered victim. The victim is a bag of bones, "like all other bags" (3) in the hands of the women searching for bones of loved ones: "His bones, like thousands of bones/ in the mass graveyard" (3). However, the sense of the impersonal suddenly changes when in the next line the narrator claims "his skull/ not like any other skull" (3). It is at this point in the poem that the bag of bones comes to have personal value to the protagonist. As the protagonist is able to distinguish her loved one's skull and separate it from all the other skulls and bones in a graveyard. Although years have passed and the site is filled with dirt and thousands of bones, the narrator is able to discriminate her loved one's skull, even when it is bare of characteristics. She begins to recall the function of each feature:

Two eyes or holes  
with which he saw too much,  
two ears  
with which he listened to music  
that told his own story,  
a nose

that never knew clean air,  
a mouth, open like a chasm,  
was not like that when he kissed her  
there, quietly,  
not in this place  
noisy with skulls and bones and dust. (3)

Through the protagonist's mental recollection of her loved one's features, she transports herself as well as the reader to the past where the victim's features were alive like his senses. Mikhail suggests through the details recalled by the protagonist that there was foreshadowing of the horrible incident that took place. Each feature in the victim's skull tells of a simple detail about him when he was alive. His eyes seem to have witnessed an incident that led to his execution. His ears listened to music that told of his disturbing story. His nose, even when it was able to inhale breath, "never knew clean air" (3). However, when the protagonist describes his mouth, she is moved to think of a more intimate memory as she recalls his mouth that "kissed her / there, quietly" (3) far from the noise of "skulls and bones and dust" (3). Mikhail's reference to the simple memories the woman has of her loved one seems to eradicate the need to create a hero out of her murdered lover. Instead her intimate memories recall a loved one who did not need to prove his heroism or patriotism through fighting a senseless war.

Moreover, it is women, not men, in the poem "Bag of Bones" who are the survivors and collectors of bones. The women in the poem are given the responsibility of piecing together the remains of their loved ones as they search for the missing parts to complete the fragmented pieces of their skeleton. Through this image, Mikhail is giving her women the duty of recollecting what has been dismembered by war. As the protagonist recollects the bones of her

loved one, she also recollects memories of his kiss, the music he heard and the tragedy that led him to this place. The woman finds triumph, not because she has won a war or a battle, but because she can find all the parts that finally complete a “full bag” (4) of the remains of her loved one and bury them, thus finally giving them rest and peace. Mikhail attempts, through the image of “Iraqi mothers and lovers searching for their loved ones, to restore, by sheer power of love, a sense of humanity to the bones and skulls” (Simawe, *The War* x). By peeling away the patriotic slogans found in other Iraqi war poetry, the writer allows her characters to concentrate on the features and the intimate memories of their loved ones. Mikhail enables her women to recollect the fragments of their loved ones either through memories, or literally as in collecting their bones, thus signifying their protest of war and the fragmentation it causes. Thus, the woman in “Bag of Bones” not only recollects the bones and memories of her loved one, but she also refuses to surrender to the overpowering destruction of war. Moreover, by boldly going to the battlefield to retrieve the bones of her son or husband, she has shown her ability to carry on with her life without the need for a man to defend or support her.

In Mikhail’s “The Prisoner,” the prisoner’s mother also protests war through recollection. The mother does this by recollecting images of her son’s freedom. While the mother is not recollecting anything tangible, the poem is filled with recollections of memories. In the first half of the poem the mother tells her son to take care of himself, something she used to tell him every time he “went of to school,” “left for work,” or “returned while on vacation” (9). Although the mother recalls general occurrences of everyday life, her recollection of these normal occurrences reveals her desire for her son’s freedom in the world outside the prison cell. She is unable to free her son, therefore she returns to the images of him going to school, to work and vacationing. More importantly, wherever he may have headed, he always returned home to

her. By only remembering images of him as a free man she protest the idea that war has broken the connection between her and her son. While war has controlled her physically, mentally she has refused to allow war to prohibit her from her recollections that have allowed her to survive far from her son.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the mother's refusal to comprehend her son's imprisonment enabled her to de-fragment her separation from him. However, recollecting memories of her son places further emphasis on her refusal to accept his imprisonment. She recalls memories in the distant past when her son was a child and she sat singing "lullabies on his bed" (9). The images that she revives are not connected to the war scene in any way. The memory is intimate and limited to her and her son alone, within the safety of their home. Therefore, the mother's protest of war is seen through her refusal to accept any images other than the images of her son's freedom.

While the mother in "The Prisoner" recollects memories, other women in Mikhail's poetry recollect their lives after surviving war or, at least, begin to do so. An example of this is Mikhail's poem "Inanna." The narrator watches the destruction of her city, or country, from afar. Mikhail who left Iraq in 1996 was only able to watch the incidents of the second Gulf war and its aftermath from her television screen. The reference to the physical distance between the war scene and the narrator shows that she has moved away from that scene. She has changed her life, her neighborhood and is only connected to her past life through the internet or television, as she states:

I see my new neighbors  
on the sidewalks  
running



for their morning exercises.

I am here....

I search you on the internet. (11)

The narrator has begun a new life far from her “old neighbors” who are “running / from bombs, / sirens / and Abu Al-Tubar” (11). The narrator is still emotionally connected to her country, which is clearly noticed in her anger and frustration over the violence in her country. However, unlike women in traditional Iraqi war literature, she does not need to be a part of the war scene in order to prove her love for her country. She has found a way to live after witnessing the destruction of war and she is able to show her affection for her country through her protest against its obliteration.

Within the same context of recollection as in “Inanna,” the Brown Mother in “To Any Other Place” states her need to move to a place far from Red Mother, who represents war. In the end of the poem, Brown Mother states: “I want to move my daughters / to another place / any other place...” (30). Her desire to move away from the war is also a desire to recollect her daughters lives once again in a place where war does not reside. Like the narrator in Innana, she finds that war does not need to be a part of her life. She is displeased with the drums of war, the fear from war’s devouring fires and the desolation that war creates. Brown Mother has also forsaken the concept of the mother who sacrifices herself and her children for the sake of her country. This is not unpatriotic of Brown Mother, but it is her need to engage in a peaceful life once again.

The women in Mikhail’s poems have taken it upon themselves to recollect the memories and pieces of their loved ones. They are no longer the protected Iraqi women who wait for the return of their men. Such is the mother in “Bag of Bones,” who goes to the battlefield or the

mass graveyard site and recollects the bones of her loved one. She does not wait for other men to bring his remains to her as she goes alone to ensure that every bone is salvaged. Even when the women are unable to change the brutality of war against their people, they decide to recollect their fragmented lives in a place where war does not exist, like in the decision that Brown Mother makes to save her daughters. Brown Mother's intent to move away from Red Mother (war) shows her breaking away from the image of the Iraqi mother or woman who endures suffering for the sake of patriotism. Furthermore, Mikhail's women have learned to survive war and found themselves able to once again reconstruct their lives from the ruins that war has left behind.

## Conclusion

From the ashes of tragedy an Iraq rises  
guarded by millions of lovers,  
an Iraq with liquid black eyes  
whose lips are dates,  
a river of ebony flows down the back  
to the waist.

-Jawad Yaqoob

Through her poetry, Dunya Mikhail has given voice to the protest of Iraqi women against the unjust wars that desolated their people over the period of three decades. Through the voices of mothers, wives and lovers, the poet displays the anguish and loss that the Iraqi people have suffered in war. The women in her poetry witness the different aspects of war and its inhumanity, as they are forced to dig for the bones of their men from mass graveyards and visit them in unfamiliar prisons. While Mikhail's women are patriotic, like women in other Iraqi war literature, they do not need war and heroisms in order to prove their devotion to their country. On the contrary, these women overlook the patriotic slogans declared by dictators and uncover the fragmentation of life caused by war.

Mikhail's women protest war in a process that begins with criticism as the first stage. This criticism of war is at times ironic and other instances direct and heated, as women announce their disapproval of war that takes away their loved ones and disrupts the normalcy of their lives. The Iraqi women in Mikhail's poetry realize the atrocity of war and they are not afraid to face those who support it as they daringly confront the different faces of war: the diligent worker, the tyrant leader, the ruthless soldier and the hungry cannibal. From questioning the reasons for war to direct criticism, as in "Inanna," these women find a way to protest against war and its

injustices. At the same time, Mikhail's women never abandon their image as symbols of life and giving. Through their condemnation of war, these women also condemn those of their own gender that have forsaken their essential roles as caregivers in order to participate in war, as in Mikhail's direct denouncement of Lynndie England in "An Urgent Call."

Furthermore, Mikhail does not end her women's protest with criticism. While her women may be incapable of confronting war physically, they find a means to protest it mentally. These women use de-fragmentation to protest the dissolution of love and family bonds promoted by war. They do so by refusing to comprehend the loss of their loved ones, they instead maintain their lives as if their loss is only temporary. The women in "The Prisoner" and "The Cup" de-fragment the separation that war has caused between them and their beloved men. These women's refusal to acknowledge war's fragmentation becomes a second stage in the process of protest that Mikhail illustrates in her poetry.

The process of protest in Mikhail's *The War Works Hard* is finalized by the depiction of loving mothers, peaceful daughters and courageous women who find the strength to recollect their fragmented lives and move on. Through recollection, Mikhail's women ultimately break free from the stereotypical image of the women in Iraqi war literature. Consequently, the women in Mikhail's poetry overcome their confinement in the home front, as they go on to reclaim their loved ones and even move forth towards more peaceful lives outside the battleground in their country. The recollection, however, is not only physical as these women also recollect past memories of loved ones' facial features or of life before the war, thus they are able to de-fragment the disintegrated pieces of memory that the war has left in their minds.

Through these three forms of protest of war- criticism, de-fragmentation, and recollection- Dunya Mikhail enables her women to undergo a process that allows them to

overcome their grievances and restore their lives without men to protect them. Moreover, while criticism of war enables Mikhail's women to break free from the passive image of Iraqi women in the majority of Iraqi war literature, de-fragmentation and recollection give them the power to re-establish their lives after the destruction of war. Thus, the desolation of war becomes a temporary obstacle that the Iraqi women cross to reach the optimism of reuniting their families and reclaiming the normalcy of life after war.

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